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## Teachers Professional Knowledge and the Teaching of Reading in the Early Years

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## **Teacher's Professional Knowledge and the Teaching of Reading in the Early Years.**

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*Abstract: What are the sources of teachers' professional knowledge for the teaching of reading? This paper reports findings from a study that investigated the role of teachers in the current Research-Policy-Praxis Nexus (RPPN). This was achieved by a specific focus upon constructions of reading in the early years in Victoria, Australia. All of the teacher participants either implemented or coordinated the Victorian Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP) in the primary school setting. These teachers were interviewed in order to hear their views on reading development and reading pedagogy and to identify the sources of this professional knowledge. The findings from this study are important for all teachers and teacher educators as they have implications for teaching practise, teacher education and teacher professional development programs.*

### **Sources of Teacher's Professional Knowledge**

There is an assumption that teachers' practice will be based upon their 'professional knowledge' (Borko & Putman 1995). According to Handal & Lauvas (1987) 'every teacher possesses a "practical theory" of teaching which is subjectively the strongest determining factor in her educational practice' (1987 p.9). This prompts the asking of questions about where this *practical theory* originates. The body of literature on 'professional knowledge' is large and diverse with a range of strands that are not bound together or integrated in any particular way (Clandinin & Connelly 1995). The strand most relevant to this article is the professional knowledge base of teachers (Shulman & Sykes 1986) and then more specifically the teacher's knowledge base for the teaching of reading (Braugner & Lewis 1998, Shanahan & Neuman 1997).

According to Connell (1985) 'knowledge of how to teach is intricate and intuitive, therefore difficult to explain or defend' (Connell 1985 p.182). In searching for a manner in which to describe teachers' professional knowledge Clandinin and Connelly (1995) chose the metaphor of a 'professional knowledge landscape'. They felt that the expansive nature of a landscape adequately portrayed the 'notion of professional knowledge as composed of a wide variety of components and influenced by a wide variety of people, places and things' (Clandinin & Connelly 1995 pp.4-5). Teachers in their study were identified within this professional knowledge landscape, as largely spending time going back and forth between two very different places: the classroom and professional, communal places. This was problematic for teachers who felt that the formal language and the associated imagery of expert competence that pervaded professional spaces was being channelled to them through a conduit and were in conflict with their desire to share stories about children and their learning experiences with colleagues (Clandinin & Connelly 1995). The professional

knowledge landscape illustrates that teachers' professionalism is multi-faceted, crucially incorporating the role and knowledge of the teacher as practitioner and as an active professional at the cutting edge of teaching knowledge and possibly research.

In considering sources of teachers' professional knowledge it is valuable to consider Shulman's (1986) domains of teacher knowledge. According to Shulman (1986) there are seven interrelated domains of teacher knowledge that are necessary to understand in order to teach: general pedagogical knowledge, a knowledge of students and how they learn, knowledge of the subject matter, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of other content, knowledge of the curriculum and knowledge of educational aims. These domains of knowledge are valuable in highlighting areas in which teachers may need to have knowledge.

Generally speaking, it is agreed that teachers are 'resourceful', and there are grounds for arguing that good teachers are essentially eclectic and pragmatic, having the ability to glean the best from theory and practice to be applied as needed (Bigge & Shermis 1999). Bigge and Shermis (1999) believe that part of a teacher's professional knowledge is developed by teachers adopting learning theories and achieving 'an eclectic compromise formed by selecting aspects of opposing theories and taking position somewhere among them so as to form a mosaic pattern' (Bigge & Shermis 1999 p.2).

Meta-cognition of one's own teaching practice is recognised as a valuable source of teacher knowledge (Bigge & Shermis 1999, Barrell 1992) as being a reflective practitioner is valuable to improving teaching (Schon 1991, Russell & Munby 1992). McDonough and McDonough's (1997) work revealed that teachers who tried to analyse what they were doing realised that their planning was based on 'layers and layers of assumptions, experiences and knowledge' (1997 p.7). They had to 'dig deep down' to find out why they made the decisions they do' (1997 p.8).

In addition to being meta-cognitive about teaching practice, Bigge and Shermis (1999) recognise the importance of understanding one's own educational philosophy. They suggest that teaching is enhanced, and learning improved if teachers are meta-cognitive about their 'teaching philosophy' in stating that 'the ways in which an educator develops instructional techniques depend on how that educator defines the learning process' (Bigge & Shermis 1999 p. xiii). Similarly, Good and Brophy (1997) argue that in order to:

become active decision makers and to develop their own personal styles, teachers need to understand the knowledge base that supports teaching, including information not only about instructional strategies but also about student development, learning and motivation (Good & Brophy 1997 p.20).

### **Sources of Teacher's Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Reading in the Early Years of Schooling**

Shanahan and Neuman (1997) identified the need for further research on teachers' professional knowledge about reading. The current study being reported sought to determine and discuss the sources of this knowledge with the teachers who

were interviewed and by doing so engage them in meta-cognition. Shanahan and Neuman (1997) suggest that teachers develop knowledge about beginning reading through:

their own formal education, their reading and reflecting on the work of published researchers, their close observation of and with each other, and their ongoing study of their classrooms' insight of new understandings from teachers' and researchers' work (1997 p.5).

Unfortunately, Shanahan & Neuman (1997) fail to mention the source of these assumptions. Nonetheless, these categories were useful to consider with regard to the sources of knowledge revealed in interviews of Early Years Victorian literacy educators. Additionally, it was deemed important to find out what sources of educational research teachers are accessing, whether they were involved in teacher action research projects or research conducted on teachers by others, or if they in fact engaged in any professional reading of research.

Braugner & Lewis (1998) acknowledge close observation, reflection and analysis as sources of teachers' knowledge about the reading process. Furthermore, they believe this knowledge to be crucial to the knowledge about how children learn to read and what helps and hinders the process. Goodson and Hargreaves (1996) also suggest that further research be conducted with teachers and their emphasis upon the teacher as the professional is well-illustrated by the following quotation:

We have to direct our inquisitive gaze at teachers' own experienced worlds, and from there, pose demanding questions to those who seek to change and restructure the teacher's work from above. For at the end of the day, teacher professionalism is what teachers and others experience it as being, not what policy makers and others assert it should become. The experience of professionalism and of its denial are to be found by studying in the everyday work of teaching. There too, we will start to recognize the social and occupational conditions which support such professionalism or hasten its demise (Goodson & Hargreaves 1996 p.23).

In summary then, the above research acknowledges that there are a range of sources from which teachers develop their professional knowledge. These sources include their personal knowledge and experience, their own formal education, their reading of research, their use of meta-cognitive processes and processes of observation, reflection and analysis of their own and others' teaching.

## **The Study**

The data for this study was collected by conducting semi-structured, individual interviews with 20 teacher participants who work in the Victorian government primary school system. Ten government primary schools were randomly selected from two regions in the Victorian government primary school system. Schools were contacted in turn until twenty participants volunteered to be a part of the study. Four schools from each region chose to participate and 20 teachers (2 males and 18 females) who used the Victorian Early Years Literacy Program with children in the first three years of primary schooling were recruited for individual interviews.

The teaching experience of the participating teachers ranged from those who were in their first year of teaching, to those who had taught for 35 years. Some of these teachers assumed dual and multiple roles within their school and so at the time of the interview all of the teachers fulfilled one or more of the following roles: Assistant Principal, Early Years Coordinator, Classroom teacher, Specialist teacher and Reading Recovery teacher.

The study was designed with the purpose of tapping into the professional voice of teachers and therefore 'interviews' were selected as a powerful means of attempting to understand others (Fontana & Frey 2000). A critical analysis of the Victorian EYLP (Ohi 2006) identified it as being highly organised and routinised and projecting a certain view of early years reading. This raised the question as to how the implementation of the EYLP impacted upon teachers' roles and practice in the teaching of reading in the primary school. It was therefore decided that teachers would be interviewed individually rather than as a group so as to encourage individuals to speak freely and without inhibition about their views on early years reading and pedagogy and also their views on the Victorian EYLP and their implementation of it.

The individual teacher interviews were 'semi-structured', a valuable form of qualitative interview that allows for maximum flexibility during the interview process (Carspecken 1996). This element of freedom provides opportunities for the interviewer to raise issues and questions that arise during the interview and also to explore ambiguities and contextual factors and to clarify the respondent's answers (Yates 2004). The teachers were asked to engage in interviews of approximately 30 minutes in duration however, all participants generously chose to extend this and the interviews lasted between 40 minutes to 2 hours. The interview questions used elicited discussion from teachers on the following topics: their teaching background, views on reading, professional development, teaching with the EYLP, classroom management, reading assessment, the sources of their professional knowledge and if and how they accessed research.

### **The Sources of Professional Knowledge Identified**

During the interviews the teachers were asked to identify the main influences upon which their view of how to teach reading was based. This information was considered valuable in the identification of the sources of their professional knowledge about the teaching of reading. It was also a means of determining the kind of nexus that exists between research and practice in this context. Additionally teachers were asked if they kept up to date with recent literacy research and how they accomplished this.

Qualitative thematic analysis of the teachers' dialogues identified teachers as drawing their professional knowledge for the teaching of reading in the Early Years largely from one or more of three particular sources. Firstly, teachers drew knowledge from their own professional experience. Secondly professional knowledge was drawn from their interactions with other teachers and thirdly they drew knowledge from networking with other professionals in the field (other than primary

school teachers). Each of these categories will now be discussed in turn and supporting evidence provided.

### 1. Teachers' Professional Experiences as a Source of Professional Knowledge

When asked to identify the influences upon the development of their personal, professional view of reading the most influential factor expressed by the majority of teachers was the importance of their own professional experience. These experiences included those that took classroom range of experiences. Some sample responses to the question "*What has influenced you in developing this view of reading?*" are provided below. Some responded that:

It's more my personal experience. Because people who've been around for a few years have seen all the systems. They've seen it all go around in circles numerous times. And its basically you've gone from the really formal type Betty and John type stuff, down to the Joan Kirner years of the do as you like. They'll learn when they're ready, all this sort of stuff, down to the Early Years which is far more structured, so its sort of basically gone whole circle (Karen 29 years teaching).

I don't know, I suppose experience really. Kids learn faster if they're confident, kids learn faster if they're happy. Kids learn faster if they're empowered or happy, yeah (Geraldine, 18 years teaching).

A large proportion of the teachers who identified their teaching experience as being the main influence in developing their particular view of reading specifically explained that they learned by 'watching what children do' when they read and by reflecting upon their own teaching practice. In this manner they were metacognitive as shown by the following extracts which are responses to the question: "What are the main influences upon your view, of how reading develops and of how to teach it?"

Observing the children first of all and considering the teaching practices that are best suited to the needs of those kids. Also trying things out and seeing what works and what doesn't. Just being aware that your practices need to change and you're always going to be learning yourself (Emma, 1<sup>st</sup> year of teaching).

It's comes from my experience in watching children. Some children just pick up that the word unit is exactly that. I don't know why they do that and I've actually seen it happen (Glen, 1<sup>st</sup> year of teaching).

Most of it comes from experience over the years of teaching, seeing what children do, learning from what they do. The Professional Development that you have over time, talking with other teachers about their experiences and how they go about solving problems and helping kids. It's all of that teaching experience and all that that involves (Janine, 18 years teaching).

Experience working with children, probably my initial teacher training and just watching children learn I guess (Jane, 22 years teaching).

The teachers who identified the importance of ‘watching children learn’ were of a vast range of years of teaching experience. As simple as it sounds, learning about reading by watching the children was a valued strategy and source of knowledge for some of the most experienced teachers in the group. In reflecting upon her own teaching experiences Julie explained that watching the children and gaining an understanding of their abilities and needs is a part of the professionalism of the teacher:

I guess that it’s understanding children and their development at the same time. Understanding what types of activities and needs that they have for that development level and then planning the classroom program accordingly. I guess that’s where the professionalism of the teacher comes in. We can look at a child and say this is where a child is at and these are the activities that I can give this child... Giving children the confidence, knowing that they can do it and they will do it and waiting patiently. All that comes from just my observation over the years, what works and what doesn’t (Julie, 22 years teaching).

Mandy highlighted the importance of learning from one’s experiences and shared a scenario that alerted her to the fact that children come from varied background experiences:

One time in particular I was talking about the importance of talking before you teach reading and before they start to read. One mum said to me, “I never talked to my children until they could talk!”. And I knew the children so I thought, “That’s why they had problems!”. They hadn’t been spoken to or taken places to give them that rich experience. And teaching the parents each year has been enlightening to say the least. Because we as teachers just think everyone thinks like we do. That they buy their kids books and they read to them when they are babies, but they don’t. So that’s what I’ve learnt more than anything is to take nothing for granted. Don’t expect that children will come to school with the experience that my children have had, because they don’t (Mandy, 20 years teaching).

The above excerpt highlights a significant moment when Mandy recognises and appreciates that her own professional knowledge as a teacher may not be common knowledge to parents or layman in the area of language and literacy.

It is noted that two of the teachers that identified ‘professional development’ (PD) as the most influential source of knowledge upon their professional knowledge of the teaching of reading identified their own life experiences as the form of PD. Geraldine’s recount of her most influential professional development experience is reported below in summary. Although lengthy, this piece has been included for its value in providing insight into the identification of what type of PD has a significant impact upon experienced teachers and how the EYLP worked in another school:

Four years ago I did a week’s exchange with a teacher from an exclusive suburb and she didn’t know what had hit her! It was a Professional Development run by the region. We both had Grade 2’s. I walked into a room with 23 boys and girls that were all literate. It was fantastic! They had all

benchmarked. All the boxes were ticked and crossed and I realised that I really started to nod off one afternoon in the classroom! And I thought, 'Oh my gracious. How easy is this? They don't even need me!'. They were socialized and English was their first language. They were probably reading before they walked in the door. Whereas for us out here, you know, in another decade it'll be a bloody ghetto school! If the government Department have their way this is what'll happen. We run ourselves ragged pitching at all these different levels. We've got very bright kids here and some very slow kids and this was just an average Grade 2. I thought, we are doing the right thing. To me, that was the most valuable PD, in that I knew we were pitching at our levels!

But it was empowering because I knew everything we were doing was right. I was tired at the end of the day here and I knew why I was and why I wasn't tired there. And just the differences in your clientele, in your actual kids in your classroom! And our kids and parents don't have social skills. We're working with classroom control, cohesion and harmony the whole time. But there they lined up orderly, came in orderly, did their work orderly and I sat in my chair and thought "Oh, how do you keep awake at this place?" (we both laugh). So it was re-affirmation, and that's what we don't get enough of. That we're doing the right thing and that we are looking after our kids and it doesn't matter what your data bloody says or um, who's gonna slap us over the wrist for not reaching our goals bla bla bla. Yeah. Our consciences are clear and we know that we're doing a great job (Geraldine, 14 years teaching).

It is interesting to note that Geraldine's most influential professional development was this real-life scenario in which she had the opportunity to stand in someone else's shoes. Her account is enlightening in illustrating the stark differences between two very different enactments of teaching with the EYLP: two contrasting schools with a very different (generally speaking) mix of communities and students in terms of culture and socio-economic status. Geraldine seems to thrive on the challenge of teaching her students at her school and her dialogue, in my view, paints a picture of her as a highly professional teacher who is dedicated to the students entrusted to her. Interestingly, this very rich and effective PD experience contrasts greatly with the highly structured EYLP modules of training.

In a similar vein, Joseph identified his real life experiences as the most influential form of professional development:

Even just going into other Grades within the school I've learned a lot about how it's done. I mean it's easy to go to a Conference and just pick up and write down a new skill and say "Oh, I'll try that". But seeing it being done... I mean I've been lucky because this is another form of PD in a way. To go and visit other Grades and to find out how they do it and then to come back and have a go. Um. Yeah, and I find that that is the best kind of PD really. Just having a look, yeah (Joseph, 8 years teaching).

Many of the teachers who were interviewed in this study reported professional development courses as being a major influence in the views that they had of early years reading and reading development. The majority of them mentioned EYLP as the most influential course as can be seen in the following excerpts:



Well, it would be the Early Years Literacy Program. We went to a number of PD talks over those years and then we also had trained within the school.

*I: Can you describe what was good about this PD?*

It just seemed to make things clearer as to why you do it, the order you teach things and why you do certain activities with the children. It offered me ideas and it refreshed my ideas that I'd already done.

*I: Did it have any impact upon your view of the reading process?*

...it just reassured me that I was doing the right thing.

*I: And classroom practice?*

Well I had to change to that pattern that we have, I mean: Whole, Small group, um, Whole. So yes, I guess my practice changed dramatically (Irene, 12 years teaching).

Jane acknowledged the influence of the EYLP upon her professional knowledge and teaching practise:

*I: What has been the most important/influential professional development about the Teaching of reading for you in the last 4 years?*

Probably the Early Years Program. I've also been in the library for six years here. So when I came into Prep 3 years ago, that was the first contact I had with the Early Years Program. So I guess, that's probably been the greatest influence. It's certainly changed my style more than any other PD that I've ever done (Jane, 22 years teaching).

Although Emma had no prior background in teaching early years reading without the EYLP it is interesting to hear her perspective on the EYLP professional development course:

There's a series of videos and you can actually see what they're explaining actually happening within the classroom... I can see how they're doing it then I can apply that to myself and how I would change the practices that I do. In that way it's been helpful.

It gave me a greater understanding of the reading process, particularly the stages because there's quite a few of them and it made me sort of think more about where the children I have in my room fit in (Emma, 1<sup>st</sup> year teaching).

As revealed in the above excerpts Emma found the EYLP videos valuable in providing her with information about reading development and to demonstrate teaching practices. As evidenced by her dialogue Emma's expectation was to view the departmental videos and to change her practices to match. In doing so, it seems that she uncritically accepts the EYLP as a valuable, professional source of knowledge for the teaching of early years reading. Joseph also spoke of the influence of the EYLP upon his views of reading:

What has influenced you in developing this view of reading?

Well I think it (the EYLP) confirmed what I already knew. At University you just think that these are the things that we have to do and this is how you take

kids for a reading group. But once you're in a school and you have real children and then they come up with these new programs and then you sort of think, "Yeah, that's, that really makes sense and that's how we really should be doing it". I mean, the EYLP is a new initiative and I know all schools are doing it. It's a government initiative, so obviously there was a lot of energy and a lot of money and a lot of resources put into it (Joseph, 8 years teaching).

The fact that the EYLP was a government initiative that was widespread well funded clearly had a strong influence upon Joseph's acceptance of it. Shauna recognised her own knowledge of the teaching of reading to have been partly influenced by past methods of reading instruction that were advocated or mandated by schools she had worked at:

There have been a lot of different methodologies that I've looked at and some that I have decided as not being beneficial for all children. Some styles suit some children some styles suit others.

I: Where did these methodologies come from?

Basically the different schools that I've been at had a policy of using one particular method of teaching reading or another. I've always been a little bit flexible in a way. I've used quite a different variety of methods because I know that one method will not suit all children. So, basically I give the children a lot of different methods and ways of reading development so that all of them can achieve success in one way or another (Shauna, 27 years teaching).

As described above, Shauna applies her knowledge of these methodologies to her teaching by exercising professional judgements about their suitability to her students.

## **2. Learning from other Teachers**

The following responses have been provided as representative of the teachers who identified sharing, networking with and observing other teaching professionals as a main source of professional knowledge and a main influence upon their view of how to teach reading:

Something I find really good is the chance to talk to colleagues about what we're doing, how they're going, what works for you, and sharing that. Because no matter what, I don't think that we can ever say that we really know all there is to know about teaching or even the reading process. So looking for new ideas um, it's an ongoing learning process. We are lifelong learners (Janine, 18 years teaching).

Janine highly valued the sharing of professional knowledge and experiences with teaching colleagues as a way of learning, sharing expertise and teaching stories. Similarly, Kathy stated that she learns about teaching reading by watching other teachers in action:

The big influence is other teachers. Looking at them, how they go about it, their modelling. Bringing my own teaching style into it, varying it if I want to, discussing it with other people, yeah (Kathy, 15 years teaching).

*I: What have been the main influences upon your view of how you teach reading?*

The CSF is a helpful starting point. All the PD's that you go to and your co-workers! You get so much knowledge from co-workers. For me, Heather and Janelle are 2 reasons why I came to this school. So I think that sort of knowledge shouldn't be dismissed as well as just the knowledge that you bring. I mean you're talking about perhaps common sense there as well, you know, from your own family and modelling processes. So I think there's a lot that you bring to it without being consciously aware as well as things that are taught in University and things you pick up by reading (Julie, 22 years teaching).

As dispelled above, Julie held her colleagues' professional knowledge and experience with such high regard that she changed schools to work with them. When asked if there were any particular theories of reading, or something that strongly guides her teaching of reading Shannon responded that:

My biggest guide would be other teachers. Just through observing other teachers I've taken things that suit me and my children and adapted them to suit my grade. So I think my, my biggest influence has been other primary school teachers. (Shannon 5 years teaching).

As a beginning teacher Shannon highly valued and benefited from learning from other practising teachers. Similarly Leah identified learning from others as the most influential source of knowledge for the teaching of reading:

Other colleagues. I have to say, and also from the experience of like trial and error. I mean that's all that you can really do (Leah, 3 years teaching).

She also values and learns from her own teaching experience and trial and error.

### **3. Networking with other Professionals in the Field**

Most of the teachers in this study identified several sources of professional knowledge that stemmed from the prior two categories of knowledge sources for the teaching of early years reading. There were however, two very experienced teachers who also identified networking with professionals (other than primary school teachers) in the field, as influential professional knowledge sources. Consider the excerpts below from Julie and Mandy:

I have been attending, earlier this year, the AEU Principals Conference. A fellow from the University, from Education Queensland. It wasn't specifically about literacy but it was about bringing educational policies into line with modern life and that was really good. Then I gave a report on it to the staff and that's just sort of tweaked us more into higher order thinking. So although it wasn't specifically about reading as such, it's actually looking at the nature of society now. What societies needs are, and so reading here has gone from just reading a Grade 4 reader to reading all sorts of things. It's taking us up another step with what's happening in education.

*I: Can I just ask, was that Allan Luke?*

Yes! It was Allan Luke and it was just terrific. So it just kind of tuned us in to being up with what's happening (Julie, 22 years teaching).

Interestingly, as a result of listening to Professor Allan Luke (who is currently a renowned academic in the field of literacy and an advocate of multi-literacies), Julie explains that her school now encourages students to read more widely, probably from other genres and varied media forms. Critical analysis of the EYLP (Ohi 2006) identified the EYLP as notably lacking in encouragement of this notion of literacy and its associated pedagogies<sup>1</sup>. This support for multi-literacies, in conjunction with the school's notable flexibility in allowing their Early Years team to dramatically modify the implementation of the EYLP literacy block, characterise Emu Grove Primary school's approach to literacy learning and instruction as being more based upon teacher's professional knowledge and focussed towards catering for their students' literacy needs and interests by providing greater professional autonomy to the teachers. It seems that this school has partially modified their implementation of the EYLP in a manner that they perceive as effective for their students and teachers as opposed to adhering to a strictly doctrine approach. Julie described her awareness of this type of indoctrination in her comment about a new graduate teacher at her school:

We have a few new people who are just learning and need to understand the way that we do things. They came in with a different idea. We had a graduate who had the University idea of the Early Years but she needs to build up the knowledge about it so then she can adapt it to make it work for her rather than just having it be a bible and then we carry it out (Julie, 22 years teaching).

In the above excerpt Julie expresses her encouragement and intent for the new teacher to further develop and exercise her own professional knowledge by applying it to practice.

Mandy recalled the strong influence of two academics when describing sources of knowledge about her understanding of the teaching of reading:

It was meeting Marie Clay and the way she spoke about how this program worked in New Zealand. I just thought we've got to have that somehow. If there was the money, I would love every Early Years teacher to train in Reading Recovery. ...Because once you've done it you can't change after that. They are so very good in PD and you are trained to such an extent that you think, "What was I like before?" And each fortnight when you go and you learn another little thing. You think, "How didn't I think of that before?" You know, "How have I taught all these years and not known about that?"

Reading Recovery changed me and I found that I was teaching in that way because I knew that we should. And then when the Early Years program came out and I heard about it. I thought, I want to do that training because I wanted everyone to teach like this.

...But also listening to people, experiences and research people. I'm trying to think of some names but I can't think right now. But even people to do with learning styles like um Dr. Julie Aitken. She's to do with learning styles and brain learning. Now understanding the brain and understanding how the brain

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<sup>1</sup> This is discussed in a forthcoming publication by Dr. Sarah Ohi

works and understanding individual learning styles really helped me to put that into the context of reading. And then now I've started to think that we have to do it in the context of children's preferred ways of learning and then introduce them to other ways of learning (Mandy, 20 years teaching).

Evidently Mandy is highly interested in improving student learning and reading and seeks out the ideas and research of other professionals.

## Conclusion

In summary, this study found that the professional knowledge of early years reading development and pedagogy of the participating teachers was based upon their own professional experiences, their own learning from other teachers and from networking with other professionals working in the field of education. In this study, teachers' experiences included those within the classroom where they are watching the children, understanding their needs and observing what works for them. The teachers were thereby found to be exercising their professional judgement by being meta-cognitive about their own teaching practise. Also of significance to teachers' professional knowledge about reading were professional development programs. The teachers identified the value of professional development as a means of providing them with opportunities to experience teaching in other contexts and to view other teachers teach. These experiences informed teachers about the reading process and how to implement particular programs.

The teachers in this study also highly valued their own learning that occurred as a result of interacting with or watching other teachers. They commented positively about opportunities to share, observe and work with colleagues and teachers from other schools. Furthermore, a couple of teachers identified networking with professionals from other parts of the education arena as an impressionable source of their professional knowledge about the teaching of reading in the early years.

In this manner the teacher participants in this study were professionals who were striving to actively develop their own professional knowledge for the teaching of early years reading in the classroom and who, regardless of their years of teaching experience, were open to learning more and refining and increasing their own professional knowledge. In this way in terms of teachers' sources of professional knowledge for the teaching of reading in the early years of schooling the findings from this study concur with those of Shanahan and Neuman (1997) and Braugneer and Lewis (1998). The findings from the current study support the notion that teachers who teach reading are reflective, analytical professionals who are open to supporting the learning of their students and adapt their own teaching to attain ongoing improvement. At the same time however, this study found that the majority of the teachers interviewed had limited access to educational research. Educational research was not explicitly identified by them as a major source of their professional knowledge for the teaching of reading. Other than the research accessed by the two teachers who had networked with other professionals in the field, the teachers' access

to research tended to be mediated by secondary sources. A number of pertinent reasons for this and associated implications have been identified<sup>2</sup> by Ohi (2006).

The findings from this study therefore suggest that teachers and pre-service teachers be provided with further opportunities to meet with colleagues and other teachers to share and discuss their teaching experiences and professional issues that arise. Teachers are relishing the opportunity to air their concerns and to celebrate their achievements and those of their students. The opportunity to engage in such conversations is invaluable to ongoing collegial and professional support and the enhancement of teacher's professional knowledge for the teaching of reading. Professional gatherings such as these are crucial in ensuring that pearls of wisdom in this area are shared and not lost. Furthermore, it is suggested that pre-service teachers be permitted to attend these sorts of meetings and also be provided with opportunities to observe and assist in Early Years classrooms so that they may increase their own professional knowledge about children's early reading development.

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<sup>2</sup> This important issue is discussed in Ohi (2007) and a forthcoming publication by Dr. Sarah Ohi

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